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Research Note: The Lord of the Rings and 'Identification'

A Critical Encounter

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ABSTRACT

The concept of 'identification' remains a commonly called-upon resource for considering how media audiences might be influenced into taking up moral and cultural positions. Yet very little empirical evidence exists to support its claims; and recent critical conceptual work has significantly undermined many constituent parts of it. This article draws upon the very large data set gathered in the course of the *Lord of the Rings* international audience research project, to mount critical tests of the concept's claims. The article then uses a combination of quantitative and qualitative evidence to explore the different bases on which audiences chose nine of the films' characters as their favourites. An alternative approach to theorizing audience relations to characters is briefly outlined.

Key Words audiences, identification, *Lord of the Rings*, quantitative, qualitative

The *Lord of the Rings* (henceforth *LOTR*) project was a 15-month, 20-country study of the launch and reception of the final part of the film trilogy of J.R.R. Tolkien's books. The project had three stages: a study of the prefigurative materials in each country (marketing and publicity, press, magazine, radio and television coverage); a databased questionnaire combining multiple-choice with free-text responses, available online but also completed on paper in a number of countries; and follow-up interviews with individuals chosen to typify response-positions from the questionnaire responses.

The volume and density of materials produced by the project is enormous – with 24,739 questionnaires across the world, and in the UK alone 2512 prefigurative items and 107 hour-long interviews. Because of this, over time it should permit systematic investigation of many questions which have, to date, been mainly the subject of speculative claims.¹ This article addresses one such question: that of audience 'identification' with characters in films.

The concept of 'identification' has a long and problematic history within media studies. According to standard histories, the concept emerged in mid-20th-century America. Rooted in American mass communication research, the concept drew upon behavioural psychology, and popular psychoanalysis. Applied to the mass media, it took on two sublabels: vicarious learning (see Maccoby and Wilson, 1957), and incidental learning (see Bandura and Huston, 1961). Its

assigned task was to explain how fictional materials 'reach' their audience. If audiences 'identify' with particular media characters, they may come to 'take part' in the story to a depth where they become open to its 'values', or 'messages'. The concept belongs to a domain of thought concerned with audiences' *vulnerability*. I have argued elsewhere (Barker, 1989: Ch. 5) that the concept was at work, albeit without the particular word to express it, as early as the 1850s. Its component parts were at work within, for example, 19th-century scares about the influence of Penny Dreadfuls. This is important, for it suggests that we may have here a concept that *benefits by remaining unclear*.

The limits of this article prevent me addressing fully the task of investigating the concept's history, and the problems in the research on which it is based. Instead, I draw on one very recent revisiting of the concept by someone who sees some of the weaknesses in the research tradition, but remains an adherent. In 2001, Jonathan Cohen published a critical overview of the status of the concept of 'identification'. Cohen's essay is wide-ranging and acute and, precisely because of this, brings clearly into view a set of contentious issues surrounding it.

Cohen acknowledges that the concept, although widely used, 'has not been carefully conceptualised or rigorously tested in empirical audience studies' (Cohen, 2001: 245). His project is to clarify it, and to distinguish it from its 'neighbours': 'imitation', 'recognition' and 'parasocial interaction'. It is interesting to read with an enquiring eye Cohen's opening paragraph:

When reading a novel or watching a film or a television programme, audience members often become absorbed in the plot and identify with the characters portrayed. Unlike the more distanced mode of reception – that of spectatorship – *identification* is a mechanism through which audience members experience reception and interpretation of the text from the inside, as if the events were happening to them. Identification is tied to the social effects of media in general (e.g. Basil, 1996; Maccoby & Wilson, 1957); to the learning of violence from violent films and television, specifically (Huesmann, Lagerspetz, & Eron, 1984); and is a central mechanism for explaining such effects. As Morley (1992) said: 'One can hardly imagine any television text having any effect whatever without that identification' (p. 209). The most prominent studies of media reception (e.g., Liebes & Katz, 1990; Press, 1989; Radway, 1983) as well as several studies of media effects (Huesmann et al., 1984; Maccoby & Wilson, 1957; Sheehan, 1983; Wiegman, Kuttschreuter, & Baarda, 1992) accorded identification an important role in the effects of the media. (Cohen, 2001: 245–6)

Without realizing it, Cohen here displays the skeleton of the problems. Let me take these problems, and connect them to the broader history.

1. I begin by noting the range of writers, and of approaches, that are in conflict with each other on a whole range of issues – yet on this seem to agree. Cohen's opening paragraph lists examples from behaviourist psychology, social learning, mass communications, uses and gratifications, and cultural studies. The remainder of the essay extends this list to cognitive psychology, feminist research, and psychoanalytic film theory. Somehow, the concept of 'identification' does service for everyone. And indeed Cohen is right that this service is to allow extrapolations to 'effects', in all cases. How does it do this? Cohen displays this in an undeclared slide from

'audience members' being 'absorbed', to identifying – as though these are virtual synonyms. Yet surely they are not. When we become 'absorbed' in a piece of music, or in a landscape (real or painted) there are no 'characters' within whom we might be 'identifying'. Nor do we need to feel that audiences thus become 'vulnerable' to covert persuasive messages.

2. It is necessary to comment on the extent to which this claim is seen to be *beyond debate*. This is after all Cohen's opening statement, of a known 'truth'. Yet he himself has accepted the concept is unclear, and lacks empirical testing. This interests me, that 'identification' is a concept held to with a certainty not grounded in empirical testing. Indeed, it has been repeatedly held to *in the face of contradictory data*. Two examples can illustrate this. Grant Noble (1975), in his study of children's relations to television, found strong evidence of a process opposite to 'identification', which he called 'recognition'. In this, children relate television characters to other people whom they know or recognize, rather than to themselves. This was an important finding. Yet Noble, without equivalent evidence, still insists: 'There seems little doubt intuitively that identification is a meaningful concept, because cinema viewers are often carried away while viewing' (Noble, 1975: 42). More recently, in one of the few studies of film audiences which directly considers audience relations with stars, Jackie Stacey (1994) explored women's recall of loving film stars in the 1950s. Using a range of qualitative materials, she concluded that these women displayed a number of distinct relations to their beloved stars: 'devotion' and 'worship', 'transcendence', 'aspiration', 'imitating behaviour' and 'copying looks'. She notes that these imply distinctly different ways of relating to the stars – yet still insists on retaining 'identification'. Her defence is: 'suffice it to say here that the term is focused upon because of its centrality to both the ethnographic material I received and the feminist debates about spectatorship I seek to address' (Stacey, 1994: 261). It is certainly true that many ordinary viewers will use the term, with a range of loose meanings. That hardly constitutes a good reason for researchers to retain it, unless they have good grounds for doing so.
3. There is something, then, in the status of 'identification' that leads people to cling to it. What might this be? We can in fact see the answer in Cohen's single sentence quotation from David Morley. His point is apt, but not I think in the way he intends. If there are to be 'effects' of the kind he believes in, there *needs* to be a concept like 'identification'. But like any syllogism, the independent assertion must be independently validated, for the dependent one to stand. If A requires B for its possibility, then A cannot be the basis for claiming B.

I believe that the answer is there in Cohen's opening paragraph, in that distinction that is again gestured to so quickly it can pass unnoticed: between 'identification' and 'spectatorship' – not in the choice of words, but in the implied distinction between self-conscious and un-self-conscious viewing.² If we look at its root claims (and Cohen's account certainly helps in this), we find a cluster of assertions: that certain media/ cultural – typically, fictional – forms contain 'textual' mechanisms that work to entrap their audiences. (These range, according to theoretical preference, across attractive characters doing exciting things [mass communications], acts of narration [literary theories] to point-of-view camerawork [film theory].) As audiences are entrapped, they go through three processes: they lose self-consciousness; they become engaged in the story *as if they were the character* to whom they have become attracted; and

they thus, perhaps fleetingly but perhaps longer term, take on the point of view (including moral perspectives) of that character. In extremis, they might lose 'the line' between fiction and reality, and absorb the character's attitudes into the rest of their lives.

The notion of some 'line' between self-reflective and un-self-reflective modes of engaging with things like films is troubling on many grounds. First, descriptively, it fails to engage. Consider the following: I go with my wife to see the film *Master and Commander* (2003). In the course of the film, I engage in at least the following acts of reflection: I get to choose where we sit, so I move towards the front, so the screen will be *big* and in my face. I move my body while watching, because I become aware that my back is in an awkward position. In one scene, a moment of by-play produces a ripple of light laughter in the small audience – this increases my own response. There is a burial-at-sea scene during which I feel tears form. I notice my wife wiping her eyes, and realize I wasn't alone in my response. I recognize Billy Boyd from *The Lord of the Rings* and realize I am finding his acting here superior. Even before the film ends, I realize I have had a double encounter with it: I have enjoyed the spectacular sea-scapes, claustrophobic on-board lives, and dramatic encounters; and I have also felt uneasy at the apparent celebration of disciplinary patriotism, and wondered what it means that such a film is made now. Which of these responses is reflective, which unreflective? To me, the distinction is otiose, because all the responses are combinations. Moments of absorption are *simultaneously* moments of reflection, and also moments of preparation, recollection-in-advance, account-building, and role-management. And while these *particular* responses may be my own, there is no reason to suppose that these *modes* of responding are not common ones.

This points to a more theoretical hurdle facing 'identification'. Like all mental processes it is not possible to observe people performing it. One cannot watch audiences, and see that they are identifying. The problem is that, taking the concept seriously, we should doubt that *they can either*. Precisely because 'identification' requires us to conceive audiences losing self-awareness, they will be unreliable witnesses to their own engagements. This paradox has been quietly ignored in the research record, where behavioural researchers have been content to ask audiences naive questions such as 'Which character did you like best?', 'Which character do you think is most like you?', or 'Which character would you most like to be?' – and take the answers as unproblematic evidence of 'identification'. Yet according to their own definitions, these questions are *bound to be unreliable*. To anyone *not* convinced of this approach, answers to these questions could well mean quite other things. Consider the third: possible grounds for giving an answer could be because a person thinks it would be a wonderful part to play, because all the other characters have a pretty lousy time, or because the actor playing the part is rich and successful (I invite imaginative additions to this limited list). The only solution would be to ask audiences *why* they chose a character. But the research tradition using these questions absolutely will not do this. The problem of how we might know when and how far a person is 'identifying' has hardly been addressed. Two interesting pieces of research that *did* seriously question the presumed stages have been quietly ignored (see Howitt and Cumberbatch, 1972; Cumberbatch and Howitt, 1974).

My argument is this: not only has the concept of 'identification' not been tested, it has *resisted* testing because its status is essentially rhetorical. It belongs rather to the intellectual armoury of cultural critics who worry about 'moral harm'. 'Identification' is one of those concepts (think 'democracy', think 'fascism', think 'terrorism' for political examples; think 'dumbing down', think 'media messages' for other culture-critical examples) whose rhetorical power is in inverse relation to their explanatory capacity. What is distinctive about 'identification' is its persistence,

and its hardly questioned status. Even with cultural studies' usual suspicious attitude towards circulating concepts, this one has hardly been questioned. It is just too convenient.

'Identification' has, as several critics have noted, a range of uses. At one end of a spectrum it is used in common parlance to express feelings of caring about a character. But it has few if any consequences, and no predictive or explanatory power. It is little more than a synonym for 'feeling engaged'. It is as a concept with the presumed capacity to find implications in people's responses that we have to be concerned.

During the 1970s, a parallelism emerged.³ In that decade's flood of moralistic concerns about 'violent media', the concept of 'identification' was frequently used as a supposed mechanism of effect. It was used both in 'scientific' treatises on media dangers and also in editorializing. But in an academic parallel, through that curious fusion of theoreticist feminism and bureaucratic 'Marxism' expressed through the work of Laura Mulvey and of Louis Althusser, an influential strand of psychoanalytic thinking played endlessly with variants on 'identification'. Arguably, the concepts of 'spectatorship', of 'interpellation' and of the 'gaze' simply reproduced in abstracted language the same pattern of claims that inhabited mass communications approaches. It was not until the late 1980s that critics began to disassemble this confusion. But rather than abandon the concept, it became increasingly fuzzy, as writers spoke of 'mobile', or 'shifting' identifications. They spoke of identifying with a scene, as much as a character. In short, they stretched the concept without considerations of coherence or evidence.

Criticism of the concept, when it eventually began, came largely from within film studies. An important contribution came within Noël Carroll's (1990) philosophical investigation of horror. In a lengthy discussion, Carroll dissected 'identification', and showed its a priori weaknesses, focusing in particular on the discrepancies between characters' and audiences' knowledge and emotions. Carroll also critiqued the general psychoanalytic approach that underpins many of the claims about 'identification'. As a ground-clearing exercise, this critical analysis is valuable. But, as I show shortly, Carroll's positive approach poses a problem.

Probably the most telling contribution was Murray Smith's (1995) *Engaging Characters*. Smith's approach is rooted in a combination of cognitive theory deriving from the work of David Bordwell, and the emergent application of analytic philosophy to film. His book is a subtle engagement with three questions: (1) What exactly are 'characters' on screen, and how do they relate to 'persons' whom we meet beyond the cinema? (2) What is the role of emotional engagements with films? (3) In what ways does the structural organization of a film make calls upon us? Smith's book repeatedly uses detailed explorations of one film, in particular, Hitchcock's *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956 – henceforth *TMWKTM*) to introduce a series of distinctions. Crucially, he distinguishes 'alignment' with, from 'allegiance' to characters. 'Alignment' signals the ways in which a film invites us to follow the fortunes of a character, even of one who is narratively off-centre or morally problematic. 'Allegiance' refers to the ways in which we are invited to *care* about the fortunes and fates of particular characters. But these also are set within the frame of a further important distinction between central and a-central imagining. Smith argues that it is wrong to conflate 'imagining that I am X', and 'imagining what it would be like to be in X's situation'. For 'identification' to have force, the former has to happen. But, argues Smith, the ways in which films call upon viewers' knowledge and emotional responses indicate that actually the latter is taking place.

Smith's argument is avowedly textual. He is challenging the ways in which a good deal of

contemporary film theory has characterized the ‘spectator’ as a function of the text. And in this his arguments seem to me powerful and persuasive. But there is a price to pay. Smith’s analysis of spectators’ responses has to presume that they come to a film like *TMWKTM* without knowledge or preconceptions. This has not only to be their first viewing, it has to be a viewing uninformed by any prior motivation, expectations, or formative assumptions. They have to be seen, in effect, as *perpetual novices*. An illustration of this appears when Smith is introducing his second major discussion of *TMWKTM* – its opening: ‘Openings have a special function in our experience of narratives, because we base our viewing strategies and expectations on the information we receive at the beginning of a text, a phenomenon known as the “primacy effect” ’ (Smith, 1995: 118). This echoes Kristin Thompson’s (1999) strategy in her *Storytelling in the New Hollywood*, who imagines a time when audiences did not yet know that Sigourney Weaver would be the hero and survivor in *Alien*. Such thought-experiments can be helpful, but cannot substitute for considering how actual audiences encounter any film. In complex ways, audiences go into any film *prepared* for the encounter – by generic knowledge, by posters, trailers and other prefigurative publicity, by shared talk and, crucially, by wishes, hopes, fears and other components of prior commitment.

We can see something of the same problem in Carroll’s account, to which I return for a moment. Carroll, too, uses thought-experiments as his basis for questioning ‘identification’ and formulating his alternative. So, exploring the ways in which an audience member is *necessarily* external to a character she or he cares about, he writes that:

In order to understand a situation internally, it is not necessary to identify with the protagonist. We need only to have a sense of why the protagonist’s response is appropriate or intelligible to the situation. With respect to horror, we do this readily when monsters appear since, *insofar as we share the same culture as the protagonist*, we can easily catch-on to why the protagonist finds the monster unnatural. (Carroll, 1990: 95–6; my emphasis)

This is to treat ‘shared culture’ at only the most vague and general level, and disables any investigation as to how particular groups (by age, sex, class, etc.) respond. Audience research *begins* by seeing ‘culture’ as unevenly, unequally and indefinitely distributed.

Table 1 Austrian dailies and their daily reach, 1994

1	Aspect chosen – no relevance to character	23%
2	Aspect chosen – relevance to character	12%
3	Character plays a leading role in chosen scene	10%
4	Character present in scene, but no leading role	15%
5	Character not present in chosen scene	40%

Smith’s and Carroll’s arguments thus remain essentially negative. What they demonstrate is no mean achievement: that given the nature of films, it is not possible as a general rule for ‘identification’, as traditionally conceived, to occur.⁴ But their model of the ‘spectator’ is empirically inconceivable. Research into actual audiences has to cope with the fact that people approach any film with varying levels of prior knowledge, interest, generic experience, lives and working models of the likely experience.

It is to our research that I now turn. The opportunity to explore this was not conceived in the original design. It emerged from ongoing conversations in the research team about our materials' potential to answer unexpected questions. In our questionnaire, among the questions we asked audiences were these: 'Who is your favourite character? Can you say why?', and 'What was the most memorable moment or aspect of the film for you? Can you say why?' Our reasoning was that if the concept of 'identification' is to have any explanatory power, there ought to be *some* consequential connections between preferred character and recalled aspects of the film. The task was to devise a way of using our materials to test the proposition.

Character relations in the *Lord of the Rings* data set

A set of 200 randomly selected responses was extracted from the database.⁵ These were sorted according to named Favourite Character, and a note made of key reasons for choosing the character. For the same set, a record was made of their choices of their Most Memorable Moment/Aspect, along with the reasons given for these. A check on the relations between the 200 and the larger data set suggest that they are broadly representative of the answers in the whole cohort.

The 200 responses were coded into five categories, on a principle of *conceivable relevance*.⁶ The results, presented in Table 1, are striking.

These figures do not suggest any meaningful relationship. Only 10 percent chose a scene in which their favourite character plays a leading role – and that is without asking if it is that character's role within that scene which interests them (often, it is not). More than 40 percent of recalled scenes did not even include the favoured character. The combined total of 63 percent for character-not-present and irrelevant-aspect indicates the same. Exploring the materials qualitatively makes the negative picture even stronger, since in many situations the presence of the chosen favourite character is just not the element in the scene to which attention is being drawn to.

Our research pertained to the third part of the trilogy. Almost everyone who saw the final part had watched the first two parts, often repeatedly. If, then, a process of 'identification' did occur, it should have been underway ahead of their viewing the third part. Therefore, concern for the fortunes of favourite characters should feature among the reasons for wanting to see the third part of the film, if 'identification' relations have been established. I examined the (up to three) responses people were able to give as to why they wanted to see the film.

In order to maximize the possibility that respondents might be expected to show an attachment to characters, the sample was restricted to those who had indicated that it was Extremely Important to see the film. Simply, if a viewer had formed a strong attachment to a character, it is reasonable to expect that they would have a stronger interest in watching the outcome of the story. The results were first scanned in order to see how far, if at all, these responses favour an 'identification' account, simply in terms of their naming individuals.

As with Table 1, these results shown in Table 2 offer no support for a concept of 'identification'. Overall, they show very low levels of nomination of favourite characters as reasons for wanting to see the film – fractionally lower, in fact, than the nominations of other characters. They would

be even lower if we set aside the one, interesting exception of Legolas. By far the largest proportion of reasons given make no mention of characters at all.

The exception – Legolas – is worth examining. Of the 22 nominating him, the majority of mentions is to the actor, Orlando Bloom, rather than the character (16 vs 5, with one mentioning both names). And in fact Bloom's name is the most frequent single Other Mention in the case of all other favourite characters (11 out of 40, with Legolas adding another 5). That this is a reaction to Bloom's much cultivated presence within the film as a heart-throb is confirmed by the exclamation marks, self-deprecating comments ('Ashamed to say') and comments that he is 'hot' that frequently accompany him. In other words, the main ground on which individuals are nominated as grounds for seeing the film is the *external* reason of the sexual attractiveness of the actor.

Table 2 Relations between favourite character and reasons mentioned for importance of seeing *Return of the King*

	<i>Mention favourite character</i>	<i>Mention another character</i>	<i>Mention characters or cast generally</i>	<i>Mention director</i>	<i>No characters mentioned</i>	<i>Total mentions</i>
Aragorn	6	3	6	4	46	63 (2) ^a
Eowyn	1	6	6	4	35	51 (1)
Frodo	7	2	5	7	49	69 (1)
Gandalf	0	4	4	3	48	59 (0)
Gimli	2	4	7	0	36	48 (1)
Gollum	2	3	6	1	43	54 (1)
Legolas	22	10	3	3	35	64 (9)
Pippin	4	14	9	7	41	72 (3)
Sam	3	4	4	1	37	48 (1)
Total	47	50	50	30	370	547

^a: The figure in parentheses in the Totals column indicates the number who made more than one nomination.

Thus far, I would argue that this evidence constitutes a severe dent in the armour around 'identification'. It is compelling evidence of what *does not* happen. The challenge was to devise ways of formulating an alternative account. As a way into this, I researched the *stated reasons for choosing different characters as favourites*.

A matching set was extracted from the database, for each of the characters for whom there had been a significant number of responses. I wanted to be able to include at least one female character. For this it was necessary to go as far as the ninth place – to Eowyn. A sample was formed of exactly 100 responses for each character.⁷ The nature of each character-choice population was first explored and compared. One helpful characteristic of the UK *LOTR* data set was an almost exact (49–51 percent) split between male–female responses (Table 3). This enables us to identify initial skews with ease. This works well for character choices.

These figures display six skews to female, and three to male (only one of which – Gimli – is a strong skew), an imbalance suggesting that more men either responded that it was hard or impossible to make a choice, or offered multiple choices. The strongest skew is with Pippin, towards female respondents – an unexpected result.

Table 3 Character choice by sex of respondent

Sex	Aragorn	Eowyn	Frodo	Gandalf	Gimli	Gollum	Legolas	Pippin	Sam
M	43	26	38	55	72	65	39	18	37
F	57	74	62	45	28	35	61	82	63

Several character choices again show strong skews away from the overall population spread. Legolas, followed by Gimli, Pippin and Eowyn have a markedly younger age spread than the overall population, while Gandalf, Frodo and Sam skew increasingly in the other direction (Table 4). A subset check within these populations revealed that among those choosing Legolas, the female group was distinctively younger than the male. This is not surprising – Legolas/Orlando Bloom had been identified by New Line Cinema as the basis of the films’ appeal to women under 25, and there is evidence that late script adjustments and additional filming deliberately increased his role in the second and third parts of the film, in order to recruit this audience segment. But of course that does not settle the question of the ways in which this sexual attraction might temper or shape responses to the film as a whole.

Sampled responses to the levels of enjoyment of the film show only slight variations, while there are some small and interesting variations in the level of importance attached to seeing it (Tables 5 and 6).

Frodo followed by Aragorn obtains the highest ranking for enjoyment of the film, while Gollum ranks clearly the lowest. But Eowyn followed by Gandalf rank highest for importance to see the film, while Sam and Gimli rank lowest. The differences are all small, and should not be overinterpreted. But they are interesting in light, first, of the figures for knowledge of the books (Table 7).

Here, choice of Frodo as favourite character is clearly the most strongly associated with knowledge of the books, while choices of Aragorn and Legolas are least associated.

In order to explore the meaning of these results, I examined both quantitatively and qualitatively the *reasons for choice of character*. This required the development of a coding system for people’s indicated reasons.⁸ Table 8 displays the results of coding *reasons for choosing* Favourite Character in each of the 100 sampled responses.

These figures allow us not only to see the most common kinds of references made, but also to explore connections between individual codings. Many answers permitted only single codings (e.g. ‘Gimli just because he’s a dwarf’ – coded as Embodiment). However, other answers required coding under more than one heading (e.g. ‘In the film I really like Pippin. I liked the way he’s grown throughout the films and the way he’s still innocent and funny but also he realizes just how serious everything is’ – this generated entries under the headings Entertainment, Personal Qualities and Changes across the Film). My aim, having counted frequencies, was to map a semantic pattern for each character, through recurrent words and expressions. Thereby it would be possible to see which coding categories are the most

connected or separated, semantically, as respondents themselves link their responses. Two illustrations of how this was done: ‘Gandalf because his role was messed around the least and Ian McKellen is a very fine actor’ generated a Book and a Cinematic coding – but with no overt connection between them. On the other hand ‘Aragorn. A true fantasy hero, young handsome with simple black and white morals and bravery’ not only generates the two codings Embodiment and Personal Quality, but also a linkage between these.

Table 4 Character choice by age of respondent

Age	<i>Aragorn</i>	<i>Eowyn</i>	<i>Frodo</i>	<i>Gandalf</i>	<i>Gimli</i>	<i>Gollum</i>	<i>Legolas</i>	<i>Sam</i>	<i>Pippin</i>	All (%)
< 16	8	12	6	8	15	8	26	6	12	9.8
16/25	51	55	36	33	57	37	52	41	63	44.8
26/35	19	18	22	25	23	30	7	18	10	20.9
36/45	10	10	18	13	3	14	6	13	9	12.3
46/55	10	4	12	12	1	6	7	11	2	8
56/65	2	1	4	6	0	4	0	7	2	3
65+	0	0	2	3	1	1	1	4	0	1.1

Table 5 Enjoyment of the film by relation to character choice

	<i>Levels of enjoyment</i>					<i>Median (10-2)</i>
	<i>Extremely enjoyable</i>	<i>Very enjoyable</i>	<i>Reasonably enjoyable</i>	<i>Hardly enjoyable</i>	<i>Not at all enjoyable</i>	
Aragorn	70	26	4	0	0	9.32
Eowyn	68	20	11	1	0	9.10
Frodo	81	14	5	0	0	9.52
Gandalf	68	21	10	1	0	9.12
Gimli	69	22	7	2	0	9.16
Gollum	60	29	7	3	1	8.80
Legolas	74	18	7	1	0	9.28
Pippin	72	21	6	0	0	9.24
Sam	68	21	10	0	1	9.08

Table 6 Importance of seeing film in relation to character choice

	<i>Levels of enjoyment</i>					<i>Median (10-2)</i>
	<i>Extremely enjoyable</i>	<i>Very enjoyable</i>	<i>Reasonably enjoyable</i>	<i>Hardly enjoyable</i>	<i>Not at all enjoyable</i>	
Aragorn	63	22	15	0	0	8.96
Eowyn	68	25	6	1	0	9.20
Frodo	69	17	13	0	1	8.85
Gandalf	59	20	17	2	2	9.04
Gimli	50	29	17	2	2	8.46
Gollum	54	26	16	4	0	8.60
Legolas	64	17	14	5	0	8.80
Pippin	72	16	10	1	0	9.02
Sam	48	29	20	1	2	8.40

Table 7 Frequency of reading *LOTR* books in relation to character choice

Reading the books						
	Read all more than once	Read all three once	Still reading	Read some	Haven't read any	Median (10-2)
Aragorn	34	20	13	7	26	6.32
Eowyn	55	17	9	6	13	6.90
Frodo	64	12	6	9	9	8.22
Gandalf	52	31	3	3	11	7.20
Gimli	46	22	3	11	18	7.34
Gollum	47	22	4	7	20	7.38
Legolas	27	30	4	15	24	6.44
Pippin	53	23	11	1	11	7.06
Sam	36	23	4	8	29	6.58

The ambition here is to establish a link between a quantitative account of frequencies of attribution and a qualitative account of the meaning and patterning of these frequencies. We therefore need to examine how particular modes of expression, chosen in light of their quantitative frequencies, may display patterns of semantic associations. By character, then, these assemblages look as follows. For each character, I include a reminder of any distinctive tendencies displayed in the earlier tables. I also indicate recurrent references to particular moments where the essential qualities of a character are said to be displayed (their iconic moment). Expressions emphasized are either direct quotations or summaries of near-equivalent expressions.

Aragorn

Quite gender- and age-neutral (with just a slightly greater tendency to be chosen by men and younger aged viewers), he associates with above average Pleasure but slightly less Importance. He has the least strong connection with Book-reading. Aragorn most commonly codes for Embodiment of Qualities, for Change across the Film and for Personal Qualities. These are caught in the following expressions: *a true leader because he is reluctant to be one, masterful, showing integrity, humility and resilience, a fantasy hero. He is searching for what he is – he is on a quest for himself, and he gradually discovers and assumes his destiny. He displays clear morals, and is brave.* Bonuses are for some that he is *young, handsome, sexy* – but these never appear to cross-connect with his character qualities; in other words, he is a leader *and* he is handsome, but it is not part of his leadership qualities that he should be handsome. Personal Connections made are that he is *someone to be looked after by, or to aspire to be* – this fits with the predominance of Embodiment responses. Aragorn has no single iconic moment that people recall to mark his character (examples mentioned, but only by a single respondent, are his summoning of the dead, his speech at the Gates of Mordor and his bowing to Frodo and the Hobbits).

This assemblage, with its low connection with Book-reading, raises the possibility that the appeal of Aragorn is in part the appeal of the film itself, as a heroic fantasy.

Table 8 Coding of reasons given for choosing characters

	<i>Aragorn</i>	<i>Eowyn</i> ^a	<i>Frodo</i>	<i>Gandalf</i>	<i>Gimli</i>	<i>Gollum</i>	<i>Legolas</i>	<i>Pippin</i>	<i>Sam</i>
Cinematic Creation	14	16	15	17	12	43	12	11	0
Entertainment Value	0	0	0	2	60	12	9	36	1
Attractiveness of Actor/Figure	17	4	4	0	1	1	35	7	3
Embodiment of Qualities	34	35	32	24	14	27	30	11	34
Action Contribution	12	20	0	11	13	0	47	0	1
Personal Qualities	48	38	39	53	24	48	45	53	85
Change across the Film	27	7	15	3	3	14	3	43	21
Relations to Others	8	11	7	9	24	5	12	32	44
Difference from Others	1	9	0	0	2	9	0	5	6
Role in Narrative	19	3	29	17	16	6	7	8	18
Personal / Social Connections	13	20	23	11	12	31	9	15	16
Relations to the Book	8	9	8	12	3	11	5	5	0

^a : Codings for Eowyn responses have, as before, been adjusted (75–100) to be comparable with other characters.

Eowyn

Considerably skewed to younger women, she associates with quite high Pleasure and Importance, but only moderately with Book-reading. Eowyn most commonly codes for Personal Qualities, which cross-connects with Embodiment. There is in addition strong strand of Personal Connections. These are expressed as: *showing courage and determination, overcoming personal pain and heartache, being selfless and strong of heart, facing up to fear*. More than anything, she embodies *being a woman* (even more than she is a character within the film). This links with her being seen as a *representative for all women, who have to fight for their place*. A repeated if minority description is an account of her as *being within her own story arc* – from repressed position, to what is without question her iconic moment (mentioned repeatedly) of killing the Witch King. In placing her in relation to themselves, there is a mixture of admiration (she is a role model) and of feeling her pain. In her iconic moment, several specifically draw attention to her exclaiming: ‘I am no man’, as a moment of special magic for them.

Eowyn, for those who choose her, seems to be an *exceptional* character, someone chosen because she is *against the grain* of the overall narrative – although that can still be enjoyed in its own terms.

Frodo

More likely to be chosen by (especially older) women, he associates with high Pleasure and Importance, and has the strongest connection with Book-reading. With Frodo, Personal Qualities lead the codings, followed by Role in Narrative, Embodiment and Personal Connections. These are expressed as: *a small being, brave in the face of his terrors and suffering, who sacrifices himself. He has limits and cannot succeed on his own. He succeeds despite the cost to himself*. What is interesting is how often these very *human* limitations are

made into figurative qualities – it is his very limitations that enable him to become *noble, tragic, heroic*. And the Personal references are, typically, that he is an example to us all, a model, *something I hope I could be*. Sidenotes – marked here precisely because they are unusual – are references to him as an *especially spiritual* figure, and to his being an *ordinary Englishman* in the guise of a Hobbit. There is no single iconic moment – except in a slightly critical questioning of whether he would ever really have turned against Sam, on the stairs to Cirith Ungol.

Frodo seems to be the character most strongly ‘carried’ by devoted book readers into the film. His appeal is a complex combination of *caring about him* with seeing his courage as a *role model* – someone readers/viewers hope they might emulate if faced with his kind of situation.

Gandalf

A little more likely to be chosen by (slightly older) men, he associates with moderate Enjoyment and lower Importance levels, but quite high Book-reading. Gandalf codes most strongly for Embodiment, followed by Personal Qualities and Role in Narrative. These are expressed as: *he is a leader, a wizard (therefore with exceptional powers and a sense of mystery), a father to the other characters who gives them hope. He is wise, kindly, benevolent, but not infallible. He remains true to his beliefs*. His role within the story shifts between two poles: either he is *someone without whom the quest would have failed*, or – more complicatedly – it is really *his story, his quest*. Acting is highly regarded here, and magnifies the achievement of all these. There are very few Personal Connections with Gandalf – the most common is to respondents’ choices being part of a larger *attraction to wizard figures*. Gandalf has no single iconic moment.

Gandalf’s magical combination of humanity and superhumanness means that he is one of the characters whose appeal is essentially story centred. He is someone we particularly ‘visit’, in reading or watching *LOTR*.

Gimli

Skewing strongly to (especially younger) men, he associates with only moderate Enjoyment and low Importance levels, and moderate Bookreading. Gimli codes most strongly for Entertainment, for his quips and banter with Legolas – often linked to comments on the *need to lighten an overall seriousness* of the film. Personally he is seen as *brave, dogged, loyal, a good friend* – but with quite a strong sense of him being a *different kind* of character. Where respondents go beyond this rather distanced relationship, the predominant Personal connection is with his Changing role, as someone who *overcomes (racial) prejudices*⁹ in and through his friendship with Legolas. There is no single iconic moment – the few specifically mentioned moments tend to be moments of intentional filmic humour (for example, the shot of him unable to see over the wall at the battle for Helm’s Deep).

Without question, Gimli is the character of choice for those who found the film too long, too heavy and in need of lightening. To choose him was to rebel slightly against the film.

Gollum

A little more likely to be chosen by (slightly older) men, he associates with quite low Pleasure and Importance levels, but high Book-reading. Gollum codes most strongly for Cinematic

Creation, and then for Personal Qualities, followed by Embodiment. These are expressed as simple *wonder at the CGI achievement*, but coupling immediately with recognition of the creation of a *dual character: a great villain, schizophrenic, a combination of comedy and menace, to be pitied and hated simultaneously, bad but redeemable, a figure of an internal struggle – not responsible for his own actions* (an interesting attribution for a digitally created figure!). These couple with recognition of how odd this feels: *strangely alive!*, *surprisingly innocent* and – most commonly – the *most complex* and *most human* character who *feels real*. People struggled to articulate their feelings, frequently using qualifiers such as *diminished the other characters in some way*. Personal Connections are made with comments such as *you want to believe he was real*, *we don't appreciate his torment*, he reminds of people who are addicted, obsessed – and *maybe we all have a touch of him inside us*. If there is an iconic moment, it is the schizophrenic debate between his Smeagol and Gollum parts. It is interesting to note how *few* comment on his narrative role. Mostly those who have chosen Gollum talk of him having *his own story* – as though it is a self-sufficient element within the overall narrative.

Gollum is surely the character who is most used as a point of comparison with self – but in an ironic, mildly self-critical way. His flaws are what interest his choosers. But it is important that in so using him, viewers to a degree detach him from his story context – he becomes a *possible kind of being*, a move which is definitely *assisted* by his having been digitally created.

Legolas

Skewing quite strongly to (especially younger) women, he associates with high Pleasure but only moderate Importance levels, and has the lowest association with Book-reading. Legolas codes most strongly for Action, followed by Attractiveness and Personal Qualities. There is also a strong presence of Cinematic Creation (although with a suggestion that quite a number of these may be implicit references to his attractiveness – just naming 'Orlando Bloom' was not enough to provoke a coding in Attractiveness, but could well be such a reference) and Embodiment. These are expressed as: his *stunts* (notably the downing of the oliphaunt – unquestionably his iconic moment), his skill with weapons, but most of all his effortless *style* of fighting. This resonates with the word that appears most frequently for him in all codings: *cool*. Legolas is cool, in all that he is and does. The qualities that are embraced under this include being: *solitary, wise, accepting his role, willing to fight to the end, a good friend*. Legolas/Orlando Bloom has a clear fan following. Their attraction to him (typically calling him *sexy* and *hot*) is frequently, however, marked as a bonus, separately (*Orlando is hot, of course – but also I loved his cool archery*, for instance). But the interesting point is the way in which he Embodies – as an elf. Elves are marked as *other-worldly, graceful, immortal, magical*. The link is in descriptions of Legolas as having an *inner glow* of goodness, being *mysterious*, and being one who speaks little, but whose cool actions speak for them.

The appeal of Legolas is complicated. For many younger women, he was a sexual magnet (although interviews reveal that other young women found this tendency in their peer group intensely irritating). But his role as 'cool dude' of the film enabled him to appeal quite strongly to young men also.

Pippin

Skewing very strongly to (especially younger) women, he associates with high Pleasure and Importance levels, and quite high Book-reading. Pippin codes most strongly for Change across

the Film, followed by Entertainment Value and Personal Qualities – and these are very strongly cross-connected. They are expressed as: *the character who changes the most – from an innocent, naive, funny, mischievous character, who makes mistakes* (a common descriptor) to *one who has had to mature, to face his fears, to play a role that only a little person can play*. Pippin comes good, because he has a heart of gold, and remains optimistic. But whereas with Gimli respondents' amusement was frequently posed as light relief in the face of a long, serious film, with Pippin amusement is part of his initial character quality, whose trajectory is then appreciated – with some appreciating also that he *retains his humour to the end*, even after pain that may have caused them to cry. Pippin is frequently described as *cute*, and *sweet, endearing* – but also as *like us*. Pippin has a definite iconic moment – his song to Denethor, which is cross-cut in the film with Faramir's fatal sally against the orc army. The song, his voice and the sheer desperate sadness of it all, are remarked by many.

The sense in which Pippin is 'like us' is complicated. It is the recognition of him as naive, and somewhat foolishly good-hearted, but then having to grow up, that make him perhaps a summary of a *journey* that viewers think it is important to make.

Sam

Skewing reasonably strongly to women (with a small upwards tendency in age), he associates with quite high Pleasure but the lowest Importance levels, and with low Book-reading. Sam codes overwhelmingly for Personal Qualities – but in a way that connects with an unusual sense in which he can Embody something larger, and with Personal Connections. Sam is described as *loyal, devoted, trustworthy, unassuming, unselfish – even when he does not fully understand what is happening – a true friend*. He is noted by some also to be *ordinary, a gardener* – and by a small number as *the most emotional* of characters. (One, but one only, marks his relation to Frodo as that between working class and middle class.) The connection to Embodied Qualities in the repeated assertion that he is *the true hero* – he embodies the ideal of perfect friendship and devotion to duty, the more so *because* he is ordinary, and scared, and *has to make decisions rather than be fated* to do things. This makes his nobility the greater. Respondents make the connection to themselves: *true friends are hard to find, we all need friends like him*. No one makes connection with Sean Astin as actor – he is effectively character alone. There is hardly an iconic moment – his whole long trudge to Mount Doom alongside Frodo is his 'moment'.

It is Sam's extreme ordinariness that captures his choosers. They want to know someone like him. To have a friend like that would be marvellous, but that friend in return would deserve to be cared for. The low association with Importance and Book-reading together suggest that Sam was a *discovery* for many who may have gone to see the film for other reasons.¹⁰

What can we learn from these semantic patterns? I believe they support a number of broader generalizations.

1. They argue strongly against any notion that there is a single kind of relationship through which viewers engage with a film such as *LOTR*. The qualities valued in each case are significantly different, and have different implications for audiences' relations with the film as a whole.
2. It is important to note among the responses the presence of a variety of *ideal expectations* – that is, external measures against which the performance and qualities of a character are weighed.
3. In varying ways, each of the kinds of relationship indicated here call upon an understanding of the *place of the character within the overall narrative*. In order, then, to understand how a viewer might relate to Sam, we must grasp their understanding of the *kind of film in which Sam is a character*. But of course that is not a 'given' – our research reveals a substantial debate about how best to characterize the film.¹¹
4. We have seen that there is no relationship between choices of favourite character, and selections of most memorable moment or aspect. Nonetheless, there are striking emergent relationships between reasons for choosing a character, and ways of conceiving the film's wider significance. Different kinds of further relevance are indicated, as the boundary between film and life opens. 'Modelling', or other equivalents that derive from the theoretical vocabulary of 'identification', operate only in one or two particular cases. And even here, the meaning of 'modelling' in our case does not look the same as in that vocabulary. There is a need, I would argue, to develop a set of terms for conceptualizing *relations between factors inside and outside the film*.

These invite a complete retheorization of audiences' relations to characters, which is beyond the scope of this article. It is likely that defenders of 'identification' will react by saying that I have missed the point, that 'identification' does not have to work in the ways that I have claimed; that 'identification' can be with a scene, or with the overall constructed cinematic point of view. Or they may reassert the claim that 'identification' is now seen as 'mobile', 'shifting'. My response is two-fold. With every slippage in use of the term, it becomes less clear, while insistently retaining its supposed explanatory force. Given this eel-like quality, I would argue that it behoves those who want to retain the concept to address the question: what kinds of evidence from actual audience responses *would* test (to confirm or confute) their claims? I am curious to hear any answers.

Notes

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1. A book of core findings from across the world is currently being developed, for publication in 2006.

2. It must of course be noted that the term 'spectatorship' has, for many, and for some time now, been reabsorbed into the 'unreflective' end of the distinction, through the work of film theorists from Laura Mulvey onwards.

3. For examples of each of these, see Barker (1989: Ch. 5).

4. It is in fact a strategy I have used myself (see Barker, 1984a, 1984b; Barker and Austin, 2000).

5. The questionnaire was made available on the web in 14 different languages, which of course raised many issues about translation – of both questions and answers. After data-cleaning, the questionnaire database contained 24,739 analysable responses, of which 3115 derived from the UK and Ireland. My random selection of 200, and subsequent selections of 100 per character, were taken from this subset. We are planning to do further cross-national investigations, to explore possible different understandings and uses of particular characters.

6. The principle of 'conceivable relevance' meant that coding was done conservatively, in order not to downplay possible character-memory connections. For example, a response of someone who had chosen Aragorn, and who in answer to the 'Most Memorable Moment' question said 'The battle of Pelennor Fields', in which Aragorn plays only a late role was categorized as Character Present. However the explanation of the answer might be entirely in terms of the scale of the event, and the magnificence of the battle scenes. Or again, a person who nominated Gollum as favourite character, and then chose Special Effects, was categorized as Aspect Relevant – whether or not Gollum was mentioned in the Special Effects answer. If the scene figures the character (e.g. Aragorn saying that the Hobbits should bow to none), this was coded as a leading moment for both Aragorn and the Hobbits, but with the consequence that the already very weak figures almost certainly overstate the connections. But clearly Sam and Frodo are not present at the battle for Minas Tirith, nor is Aragorn present on Mount Doom.

7. Using a set of identifying terms (to allow for variant spellings, or alternate names) within our ACCESS database, I gathered as large as possible a sample of people mentioning each character. I then prioritized those who (1) gave reasons for their choices – as against simply giving a name alone, and (2) mentioned this character as their first word, indicating some confidence in their choice – as against ones that might say 'Hard to answer – possibly Aragorn . . .'. A group of over 100 was formed, wherever possible, in order then to 'clean' back to 100, on a principle of removing people who mentioned more than one character, in order to maximize the degree of concentration on the single choice. In the case of Eowyn, this was not possible – the overall set of mentions was only 77. For convenience of handling, these were cleaned to 75, permitting a simple mathematical procedure to convert all her figures to proportions of 100.

8. Every reference had to receive a coding, therefore a coding system was evolved, beginning with the first character (Aragorn), which was capable of capturing all responses. By the time Frodo was reached, no further categories needed to be added, therefore it was only necessary to revisit the first two categories, in order to ensure that the coding system was being used consistently. The following meaning-catchments were used: Cinematic Creation = all references to acting, dialogue awarded to a character, display by camera, etc. (e.g. 'Ian McKellen – a fine actor in the English school'); Entertainment Value = all references to specific pleasures achieved as a result of the above (e.g. 'Gimli – good light relief in an otherwise heavy film'); Attractiveness of Actor/Figure = all references to sexual or other appeal of actor (e.g. 'Legolas – he's hot'); Embodiment of Qualities = all references to character as *kind* or *epitome* of qualities (e.g. 'Aragorn – just a natural leader'); Action Contribution = all references to physical or combat achievements (e.g. 'Legolas – he's cool with his bow'); Personal Qualities = all attributions of qualities directly to characters (e.g. 'Sam – he's loyal, brave, trustworthy' – although these count as just one attribution in the coding); Change across the Film = all references to evolution of a character (e.g. 'Pippin – he starts out so light-hearted but discovers that the world is serious'); Relations to Others = specific pairings mentioned (e.g. 'Sam – he proved to Frodo what a true friend was' [his also coded for Embodiment, because of 'true friend']); Difference from Others = all references to the distinctiveness of a character (e.g. 'Gimli – the only one who made me laugh'); Role in Narrative = all references to the specific contribution made to the outcomes of the film (e.g. 'Gandalf – without his wisdom they would never have destroyed the Ring'); Personal/Social Connections = all references to an aspect of the respondent's life or feelings (e.g. 'Eowyn – she is the kind of woman I would like to be'); Relations to the Book = all references to the relations between characters in books and film (e.g. 'Frodo – exactly as I conceived him from the books'). The coding category generating the most difficult decisions was Relations to Others. For example, it could be argued that every reference to Aragorn as leader, or to Sam as ideal friend, *implies* a relation to others. Or, Gimli killing orcs could be seen as a named reference to other characters. A decision was made to restrict this category to explicit references to other individuals, or groups (e.g. the Hobbits), with whom the favourite character is seen to have an ongoing interaction within the film. All codings were done by Martin Barker, and then checked for consistency by another member of the research team.

9. There is a grim irony in this attribution. The actor John Rhys-Davies has been the topic of serious controversy over remarks he made, which were picked up on by the neo-fascist British National Party, about the threat to British 'culture' from immigrants.

10. In fact another strand of investigation of the database has revealed a cluster of connections between liking Sam, valuing friendship within the film and seeing the film as an opportunity to go with friends.

11. Carl Plantinga (1999) usefully notices some of the implications of this. Discussing the ways in which we respond empathetically to close-ups of faces on screen, he considers the role of narrative preparation – hence that many long empathetic shots occur near the end of films, so that motivation and depth should have been established. But even then, he recognizes, this is not guaranteed: 'In many films, our response to the scenes of empathy depends on whether we believe the character deserves our empathy. In *The Piano*, our response to the scenes of empathy depends on whether we believe Ada is justified in her experience of deep sorrow when faced with the loss of her piano. To take another example if we believe Jefferson Smith in *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* to have been hopelessly naïve from the beginning, we may not empathise with his despair when he recognizes the corruption in the federal government' (Plantinga, 1999: 253). In effect, Plantinga is here pointing to different possible *viewing strategies*, which is the core of our approach.

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